

Cuban rock climbers irk Castro regime

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VINALES, Cuba -- Seventy feet up a sheer limestone cliff known as La Cuchillita, or Little Blade, 17-year-old Roylandi Gonzalez held onto a ledge by his fingertips. Then he glanced down to check the harness around his waist, grabbed hold of the rope that was tethered above him and started shimmying downward.

Over the past several years, adventurous Cuban youths like Mr. Gonzalez, schooled by an influx of foreign rock climbers, have turned this western town into an extreme-sport mecca. Climbers test their mettle on dramatic crags, barely touched by man, which soar above a green valley designated as a United Nations World Heritage Site.

But climbers who have conquered Vinales's jagged peaks and imposing walls are now bumping up against a more formidable obstacle: the Communist political system. As Mr. Gonzalez touched earth and removed his hard hat, he cast a wary eye for park rangers and police. "They threaten us and chase us off the hills," he said. "There's something about rock climbing that really seems to worry our government."

As Cubans begin contemplating life after Fidel Castro, rock climbing has emerged as an improbable political battleground between the government and young Cubans eager to embrace the latest foreign fashions. In 2003, amid a broad crackdown on civil liberties and fraternizing between tourists and Cubans, the government announced that rock climbers henceforth would be required to obtain a special permit. But the government has never granted the required permit to the many climbers who have requested one. Many Cubans and foreigners have continued climbing.

Adrian Perez Martinez, a 20-year-old art teacher with a joker tattooed on his shoulder, says that police showed up at his house recently to warn him against climbing, especially with foreigners. "Good Cubans don't do this," he says they told him. "Climbers use drugs. And you shouldn't take foreigners to militarily significant areas." Indeed, some caves in the climbing area are designated as civil-defense sites in the event of a U.S. invasion.

Some of the official anxiety over climbing seems to be based on Cuba's revolutionary history. The revolution that brought Mr. Castro to power in 1959 was launched from a clandestine encampment in the Sierra Maestra Mountains on the eastern end of the island. Mr. Castro became intimately familiar with Cuba's highest mountain, 6,500-foot Pico Turquino. "The Revolution was the work of climbers and cavers," Mr. Castro once said, according to a history by Antonio Nunez Jimenez, a prominent revolutionary leader and naturalist.

Now the Cuban government may be worried that history will repeat itself. "The system is paranoid about Cubans' private activities, but especially when those activities are occurring in hills away from sight and when foreigners are involved," says Vitalio Echazabal, one of the first Cubans to take up rock climbing in the 1990s. "The authorities would ask, 'Are they spies? What are they plotting up there?'" Mr. Echazabal got so fed up that he defected to Spain during a climbing expedition in 2001, one of three Cuban climbers who have escaped the island during international sporting events. About a half-dozen other Cuban climbers got off the island after marrying foreigners they met on the hills.

The exodus of climbers has only served to intensify official suspicion of the sport. "Climbers are very independent people, and the Cuban government has a real hard time with anything it cannot control -- even a form of recreation," says Armando Menocal, a 65-year-old Wyoming lawyer who is the leading international proponent of Cuban climbing. Mr. Menocal, who runs the Cubaclimbing.com Web site, has been caught in the climbing backlash himself.

Beginning in the late 1990s, Mr. Menocal, who has family ties to Cuba, started training Cuban climbers, mapping local routes and importing donated equipment. But after having made about 15 climbing trips to Cuba over the past eight years, Mr. Menocal has been turned back by immigration officers at the Havana airport the last two times he tried to get into the country, most recently earlier this month. The authorities, he says, offered no explanation.

The 100 or so climbers remaining in Cuba would certainly welcome his return. Without official funding, Cuban climbers rely on equipment sent by Mr. Menocal or donated by tourists. Jose Luis Fuentes, a 20-year-old climber, says his shoes were given to him by an Italian, his rope by a Canadian and his harness by an American. "You speak a common language with other climbers no matter where they come from," he says.

He isn't sure it's a language Cuba's leaders could understand. "Older people just think we're a bunch of crazy kids," says Mr. Fuentes.

Climbing has attracted a special breed of Cuban youth since Mr. Menocal and some American friends used a slide show to recruit a core group of about half a dozen Cuban climbers in 1999. One Cuban went AWOL from his military unit to go on an outing with Mr. Menocal, subsequently earning two weeks in the brig.

Official eyes were watching. "The Cubans were always being persecuted because it was not looked upon favorably to socialize with foreigners," says Craig Luebben, a rock-climbing guide and journalist from Colorado who has made several trips to Cuba. As the pressure increased, the Cubans and their American climbing partners would avoid appearing together publicly, arranging separate transportation to a rendezvous at the secluded climbing site, Mr. Luebben says.

Climbers say official government climbing policy has been inconsistent. A few years ago, Hollywood, a cigarette brand partly owned by the government, launched an ad campaign featuring a Cuban climber. Yet at around the same time, Mr. Menocal on trips to Cuba was called before two different government authorities and told climbing wasn't permitted.

The inconsistencies continue today. On a recent day at the park visitors center near the Vinales climbing site, there were large posters of climbers in action. Nevertheless, the park ranger on duty insisted that climbing without a permit wasn't allowed under the 2003 law. "It's not something one should even consider," he said, though he had no idea how one might go about getting a permit.

The climbers are regrouping under the leadership of Alexei Suarez, a medical worker who sometimes reaches his second-story Havana apartment by scaling the wall. He has been talking with government officials, trying to better climbing's image, and he says the Cuban sports ministry has been very supportive. "We are loyal Cubans who want to make Cuba famous for climbing champions," Mr. Suarez says.